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MISSION: Southwest Research and Information Center is a multi-cultural organization working to promote the health of people and communities, protect natural resources, ensure citizen participation, and secure environmental and social justice now and for future generations

## Community Survey Shows Need for Environmental Health Monitoring

The Concerned Citizens of Wagon Mound and Mora County (CCWMMC) was formed in 1999 in Wagon Mound, a village of 366 people in north central New Mexico. We came together to fight a Special Waste Permit Application filed by the Northeastern New Mexico Regional Landfill (NENMRL). In 2000 the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) granted the permit. However, in 2003 CCWMMC won a legal victory in the New Mexico Court of Appeals which they rescinded the Special Waste Permit. In 2004, NENMRL again applied for a Special Waste Permit. The permit was opposed by the community and ultimately denied by NMED Secretary Ron Curry.

The landfill will go up for its ten-year Re-licensing Permit this year. The NENMRL is currently licensed as a Municipal Landfill. In its new application the NENMRL has requested several modifications which include: expansion of the landfill, adding rail access, and again requesting permission to accept special wastes. The community of Wagon Mound continues to oppose the granting of a Special Waste Permit, although the CCWMMC will not fight the re-licensing as a municipal landfill.

Mora County is located in rural northern New Mexico. According to the 2000 Census, the population

of Mora County is 5,180. We know from the census that 25% of the residents live at or below the poverty level (the per capita income is \$12,896), and 81.6% is Hispano, with 68% identifying a language other than English as their primary language. The majority of the residents in the county have been there for five generations and longer. They are ranchers, farmers, or descendants of ranching and farming families; many have indigenous ancestry. Yet people stay in this area despite the limited economic opportunities because of its rural nature, family ties, compelling beauty, and unique northern New Mexico culture.

CCWMMC did a countywide survey assessing the communities knowledge about solid waste issues in Mora County. The survey was sent out to county box holders. In addition, door-to-door surveys were collected in Wagon Mound and from each community in the county. The results gave us ideas about what we needed to do to provide information that is useful to our community. We also were able to get a picture of some of the health issues in our county and a sense of our ability to protect our families in emergencies. Our intent with this county-wide survey was to identify issues on which we could organize and provide information and training to our communities based on their needs, and then sharing those needs and issues with local, regional and state government entities and officials. We received a small Environmental Justice Grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Region VI to help us carry out this research. The results have been shared widely in the tri-county area to community organizations and village, city, and county officials.

### CCWMMC Survey - Sample Questions

- **How long have you lived in the area? / ¿Por cuánto tiempo ha vivido en esta area?**
- **Where do you take your household trash? / ¿A dónde lleva usted su basura de casa?**
- **Do you know the source of your drinking water and where it is located? / ¿Sabe usted la fuente (de dónde viene) de su agua de beber y dónde esta localizada?**

A total of 250 surveys were collected – CCWMMC staff and volunteers collected 169 surveys, while 81 were received from the mail-out to county residents. The survey yielded some interesting findings that we believe mirror the lack of knowledge about solid waste issues that can be found in any community across this country. It was clear from the results that many people are unfamiliar with solid waste issues, and that technical terminology further clouds understanding.

In response to a question asking about “where” a regional landfill can accept waste, only 40% of respondents knew that regional landfills could accept waste from throughout the United States (57% responded “from a specified geographical location”). In terms of language, 65% of the respondents did not know the meaning of the word “carcinogenic” (although everyone was familiar with cancer), 66.4% were not familiar with the word asbestosis (a scarring of the lungs caused by asbestos), and 86% did not understand the term “half-life.” Many (74%) did not know what an Environmental Impact Study was, nor were they aware of Right-to-Know Laws. And although more than 50% reported knowing what a hazardous or special waste was, only 4% could actually name one of the types of waste. There was also general confusion between municipal and special waste, and between special and hazardous wastes. Between 30 and 40% of the respondents knew very little about the

legality, ownership, or specifics of the only landfill in their area.

In Mora County, the local volunteer fire departments and some emergency medical personnel and a couple of ambulances are the extent of emergency response available to residents. The closest Hazmat to some of these communities is between 70-100 miles away. Generally, while folks felt their local fire departments could deal with fires and even a landfill fire, most felt that community response organizations were not adequately prepared to deal with chemical or toxic spills. Only 6% of respondents identified fire departments as the only emergency resources they had, 28% reported having no emergency resources, and 17.6% were unsure where the nearest Fire Department might be in Mora County. The consensus was that the nearest hospital, depending on where you are in the county, is probably Las Vegas in the neighboring San Miguel County.

The results from health questions were also telling: 50% of respondents reported allergies, 30% reported asthma, diabetes by 33.6 %, cancer by 17%, and 16.4% reported problems with depression. The health statistics for our county and Wagon Mound are of particular importance considering that NENMRL is requesting to receive hazardous wastes which will come in by rail and highway through the heart of our communities. The waste traveling on these transportation routes through our communities is not only municipal waste, but also includes hazardous wastes that go to the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) near Carlsbad, New Mexico. Clearly our understaffed, undertrained, and under-resourced fire departments will be able to provide little appropriate support in an emergency dealing with hazardous waste. The fact that these issues are not even taken into consideration in permitting regulated facilities by NMED is a significant problem.

We are thankful to the people that allowed us into their homes and those that took the initiative to fill out and return the survey. We were a bit surprised with the honesty with which people responded to the health questions. These results prompted us to initiate a community mural project in Wagon Mound the summer of 2005. We took care to include the ideas of the community and involve youth from the village in every aspect of the project. More than 130 people from the village attended a dedication ceremony and dinner demonstrating their pride and support for these kinds of projects that help us remember and illustrate our history and promote community pride and wellness. We have also planning future meetings to discuss economic development ideas in Wagon Mound.

We are seeking financial, human, material and spiritual support for the long hard battle before us. We are raising funds not only to fight the special waste application by the NENMRL, but also to continue publication of a county wide newsletter that will give residents information and tips on how to prevent or control diabetes, asthma, and allergies, and where to seek healing and support. The health results inspired us to support the work of the Southwest Network for Environmental and Economic Justice (SNEEJ) in their statewide efforts to inform, educate and influence policy on environmental justice, and to push for a commitment to healthy communities from our elected officials and the legislature.

Issues of health and safety need to be considered when permitting regulated facilities. Although health data is available, it is not easily accessible. We feel that the NMED must work with the New Mexico Health Department to assess and monitor the health of our communities, especially where regulated facilities pose a danger to people's health. Our efforts to create jobs for New Mexicans must not be at the price of our health and environment. Community and advocacy organizations must also do their own research. This type of research can inform and provide direction for our work and alert us to community needs that may not be apparent.

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Voices from the Earth:  
Current Issue

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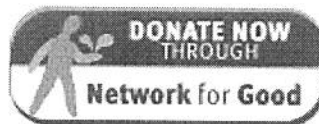
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*“New Mexico is an energy colony and energy development and natural resources exploitation must remain the focus of much of SRIC’s work. Although we continue to study problems which we feel are timely and of national import, as a public interest research organization in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Southwest Research and Information Center continues to remain responsive to community groups with constantly changing needs, bringing our technical and journalistic expertise to bear on local problems.”*

*—Katherine Montague, Editor*  
*The Workbook*  
*Volume 1, No. 14, April 1978*



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